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ABSTRACT

Media study is centered on composing and understanding the codes of three image-making technologies--film, video, and computer. It locates these activities within the context of the changing materials, processes, and systems of these technologies; within contemporary developments in their creative and critical practices; and within the evolution of human culture and its developing codes of communication (speech, writing, print). The following characteristics distinguish a curriculum in media study from others in the field: (1) it draws upon the insight of Jerome S. Bruner that there should be a balance between learning by enactment and learning by symbolization; (2) its focus on image-making codes means that the approach to image constructs is somewhat akin to that of linguistics to languages; (3) it situates itself on the cutting edge of contemporary development in creative and critical practice; (4) it introduces the study of the interactions between consciousness, the codes, and the extensions of their technologies into cultural forms and their historical transformations; (5) it involves the study of culture as an aesthetic form; (6) it is resolutely international in content; and (7) it prepares students to engage in resolving environmental, sociobiological, and economic issues in addition to the cultural ones. (HTH)

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THE CONTEXT OF MEDIA STUDY

Gerald O'Grady

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THE CONTEXT OF MEDIA STUDY

Media Study is centered on composing and understanding the codes of three image-making technologies: film, video, and computer, and locates these activities within the context of the changing materials, processes, and systems of these technologies; within contemporary developments in their creative and critical practice; and within the evolution of human culture and its developing codes of communication (speech, writing, printing, etc.).

Its mission is conceived to be responsive to several obligations: the learning of future generations (pedagogy), especially a resolution of the current split between the humanities and the sciences, the arts and the technologies; the understanding of the cultures of other peoples; and the resolution of problems in contemporary public policy. It proposes an education which addresses the needs, problems, conditions, and interests of a larger community.

The following characteristics distinguish a curriculum in Media Study from others in the field.

(1) In fusing making and interpretation, the curriculum draws upon the insight of Jerome S. Bruner (Towards a Theory of Instruction) that there should be a balance between learning by enactment and learning by symbolization. It is this fact which brought Stephen Heath to write in The (London) Times Higher Education Supplement: "In this perspective, film needs to be grasped within the framework of media centers able to join creative and theoretical work in a fluid and ceaselessly responsive way; the widely acclaimed model of such a center is the one set up by Gerald O'Grady at the State University of New York at Buffalo (an environment in which film-makers Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits have been able to work and teach)"--Redefining the Academic Boundaries of Film.

(2) The focus of the Media Study curriculum on image-making codes means that our approach to image constructs is somewhat akin to that of linguistics to languages. Although we are well aware that terms such as the language, the grammar, and the rhetoric of film are misleading, a similarity to linguistics exists in our concern with the basic physical materials and formal structures of these

new codes and technologies. We speak of an image as information mediated to the senses within culturally given bounds (e.g., a "frame" or a "line") in space and time, and one of our tasks has been to construct a matrix of definitions to clarify the differences between film, video, and digital imagery.

Film is invariably committed to a chemically-constituted materiality, and all of film practice depends on a ribbon of photographs, and whenever film synthesizes its images, they must be generated by physically additive or destructive acts. The film artifact is generally locked into one manner of presentation, that of projection.

Video images may be made without regard to recording. Nothing in the video system either requires or prohibits saving an image, and a video image may be electronically modified or synthesized at will, whether it is to be saved or not. During its early years, there was no way to record the video image.

Digital imagemaking doubly generalizes this process of image construction because there are no constraints upon the interpretation, recording, or synthesis of images. Computers are generalized devices for performing operations on systems of symbols. The computer does not "know" that the information it deals with constitutes a "picture," a "sound," or a "text," and data is freely translatable from one encoded representation to another. Like video, digital systems may represent, process, and synthesize without regard to permanent recording. Unlike either film or video, digital image-making permits a separation between primary image formation and the syntactical features that modify and inflect the image. We may save and retrieve image information ("data") and reprocess that information in whatever way we will, using a "program" that may itself be saved, recalled, and modified.

We are well aware that all of these images (film, video, digital) are continually being transformed into each other in contemporary practice, and it would be correct to think of our curriculum as founded on the changing or metamorphic image.

(3) The curriculum also situates itself on the cutting edge of contemporary developments in creative and critical practice. Since one of our primary foci is on the interaction of image with image, and image with sound on the most general level, we are equally concerned with the narrative, documentary, and experimental modes of image discourse, and, again, are aware that each is continually interacting with one or both other modes to construct new mixes or "blurred genres."

During the past decade, critical studies in film have been particularly inflected by interdisciplinary explorations by linguistic, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, ideological, semiological, and materialistic methodologies.

(4) While it is clear that the curriculum utilizes many traditional and new methods of interpretation--historical, theoretical, analytical, and inter-disciplinary--it is also clear that it differs from all others because it introduces a radically new direction, the study, within an aesthetic perspective and an evolutionary context, of the interactions between consciousness, these codes, and the extensions of their technologies into cultural forms--and the transformations that came about during this history. Ezra Pound, in a letter to T.S. Eliot on February 1, 1940 as the latter embarked on his Notes Toward a Definition of Culture, wrote: "There is, as far as I know, no English work on Kulturmorphologie, transformation of cultures. Can't use a German term at this moment. Morphology of cultures. Historic processes taken in the larger."

This is a form of study in which Sigfri[illegible] Giedion, Lewis Memford, and Marshall McLuhan have been early pioneers, and it is characterized by multidisciplinary explorations of the ways in which new codes restructure perceptions and knowledge through their impact on old codes and other aspects of culture as well, an impact that has largely been invisible and unstudied. We use the term "exploration" because, with Clifford Geertz, we understand the analysis of culture to be "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning." (The Interpretation of Cultures).

Having organized itself around the concept of image-making codes, the curriculum in Media Study is the first to locate these codes within the historic framework of the invention and evolution of other human codes and their technologies of dissemination: language which was created, perhaps, 40,000 years ago, according to the speculation of Julian Jaynes in The Origin of Consciousness and the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind; the written alphabet which was created, perhaps, 2500 years ago according to Eric A. Havelock in his Prologue to Greek Literacy; the printing press, which was created four hundred years ago and treated in the context of codes by Marshall McLuhan in The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man and Elizabeth Eisenstein in The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe. Here is a snapshot of that cultural process:

> If we take the face of a clock as representing 3,000 years (or about the length of time man has been using systems of writing), the printing press would have been developed nine months ago; the telegraph and photograph three minutes ago; the telephone, rotary press, motion picture, automobile, airplane, and radio two minutes ago. One minute ago the sound motion picture appeared. Television has appeared in the last ten seconds, the computer in the last five, communications satellites in the last single second, and the last beam a fraction of a second ago. (Robert W. Wagner in The Education of the Filmmaker: An International View.)

The focus of the Media Study curriculum on image-making codes allows it to embrace processes and structures as disparate as dreams and lasers. It has held conferences and colloquia both. It provides a point of integration for the arts and technologies, the humanities and the sciences.

(5) A curriculum in Media Study must locate itself not only within the evolution and transformations of its own technological codes, but in the scientific study of consciousness and culture. The literatires of philosophy and medicine are filled with the paradigms of the relationship between brain and mind. In The Conscious Brain, Steven Rose has shown how medieval men were imagined to be full of insubstantial humours, shadowy characteristics of the soul which permeated all portions of the body. In the seventeenth century,

Descartes saw the brain and nerves as a sort of hydraulic system, an elaborate arrangement of canals, pistons, and pumps through which were infused vital spirits. The mechanically-minded eighteenth century preferred a clockwork model full of cogs and pulleys, and nineteenth-century descriptions were based on electrical attractions and repulsions and flows of current. In the 1920's, the brain was described as a central telephone exchange, and more recent models are based on information control theories of statistical and probabilistic mechanics and a quarter-century of experience with computer engineering. Now, we are all neurobiologists. These models condition our studies of the media codes because, as Jerome Bruner and Davie Olson have demonstrated in a recent essay, "Learning Through Experience and Learning Through Media," the human brain and related sensory organization is so structured that each of us perceives and structures the world according to the media by which he or she apprehends it. It is now clear that the naive philosophical concept that a human learns the same "information" about a thing irrespective of hearing it orally, reading about it, or seeing a film about it, is wrong and misleading, and that one is "in-FORMED" differently by each medium.

When Marshall McLuhan said that "the medium was the message," he was explicating Ezra Pound's remark: "A man's message is precisely his facon de voir, his modality of apperception." When McLuhan encouraged the understanding of media as "extensions of the senses," he made the human sensorium the focus of cultural studies. Walter Ong understood this in The Presence of the Word, arguing that each different culture teaches man to organize his sensorium by attending to some types of perceptions and neglecting others. These are not excursions but central pathways of investigation of the media arts, because aesthetics is literally the study of sense perceptions.

These physical and psychical and philosophical explorations are paralleled by the studies which relate more to the networkings of society. The work of Levi-Strauss directs anthropology toward a genetal theory of relationships and focuses on what the relationships communicate. In Structural Anthropology, he points out that the study of one language leads inevitably to general linguistics but also

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involves us in the study of all forms of communication, a development which Haudricourt and Granai, whose article he is commenting upon, call a Copernican revolution. He continues:

> Without reducing society or culture to language, we can initiate this "Copernican revolution," which will consist of interpreting society as a whole in terms of a theory of communication. This endeavor is possible on three levels; since the rules of kinship and marriage serve to insure the circulation of women between groups, just a economic rules serve to insure the circulation of goods and services, and linguistic rules the circulation of messages.

Students of literature are already applying Levi-Strauss's ideas to myth and we can expect this interest to extend to media structures and their messages, a movement which should be welcomed since it interweaves with rather than isolates the study of media from the study of culture.

The study of media, then, involves the study of the sensorium and of society, and leads to the holistic study of culture as an aesthetic form, displaying a special awareness of emerging syntheses of knowledge. Jeremy Campbell's Grammatical Man: Information, Entropy, Language, and Life (1982), for example, is important because it summarizes the current state of our knowledge of the syntactic structures of language, the processes of sensory perception, the activity of the brain as a dream-state generator, the conceptualization of time in the physical sciences, the coding of DNA, the formation of paleolithic notations and symbols, and the operations of political theories, and relates them to the field of information theory developed by the electrical engineer Claude Shannon and the mathematicians Norbert Wiener and John von Neumann.

(6) In his well-known survey on "International Studies: An Overview and Agenda," Richard Laumbert showed that most college students take no undergraduate courses that are international in focus and that even if we strengthen the quality and quantity of programs and courses in international studies, this would still have hardly any effect on the student population: "If we really want to make a dent upon the outlook of a substantial number of students, we will have to reach more of them, and this means adding an international component to a large number of courses."

The curriculum in Media Study is resolutely international in content. To take even the most simple course, documentary film, we study Joris Ivens of the Netherlands filming China, Chris Marker of France filming in Russia, James Blue of the United States, alluding to Marker as he films in Colombia, Sergei Eisenstein of Russia filming in Mexico, Basil Wright of England filming in Ceylon, Roberto Rossellini of Italy filming in South Africa, etc. This holds true of our handling of the narrative and experimental modes as well, and the relative youth of film as a medium, one which enjoyed a swifter international movement than any other art until the advent of the immediacy and simultaneity of television, indicates the importance of these image codes in helping us achieve the five elements of Robert Hanvey's An Attainable Global Perspective:

> Perspective Consciousness--the recognition or awareness on the part of the individual that he or she has a view of the world that is not universally shared
>
> State of the Planet Awareness--awareness of prevailing world conditions and developments, including emerging conditions and trends
>
> Cross-cultural Awareness--awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices to be found in human societies around the world
>
> Knowledge of Global Dynamics--modest comprehension of key traits and mechanisms of the world system
>
> Awareness of Human Choices--some awareness of the problems of choice confronting individuals, nations, and the human species as consciousness of the global system expands

The curriculum in Media Study is international not only in terms of the tradition, or the past, but in terms of the present. It has regular courses on Problems in Ethnographic Cinema and held a recent conference on "Strategies of Signification in the Ethnographic Films."

(7) In being responsive to the pedagogical crisis of the two cultures and to the more general crisis of cross-cultural understanding, Media Study is already committed to the resolution of two very basic issues of contemporary public policy, and its attention to the documentary mode prepares its students to engage in others--environmental, sociobiological, economic. Today, television is a ritualized electronic theater of athletic contests, sitcoms, and quiz shows which has been

almost as repetitive as the advertisements which provide their paste. Few fragments of actuality break through and there has been absolutely no attempt to launch or sustain a continuous effort to explore and discover the most effective forms, styles, and types of documentary work which would be particularly adaptive to the new medium. There has been little recognition of the documentary as an inventive and creative process which is based on information and compassion, a sense of sympathy for others, which is at the heart of the process of public communication. The Center for Media Study, which hosted the first "Conference on Contemporary Directions in the Public Affairs Documentary," believes that the University, with its collections of information and its expert scholars across the spectrum of knowledge, will be the incubator for these new forms--the camera notebook, the observational record, the institutional analysis, the investigative report, the scientific diary, and others.

We have chosen the word "Study" for our endeavor because it denotes "a careful and extended consideration" of media and because the derivative word "studio" traces the evolution of those codes which we call media. According to Webster's, a studio was originally "the working place of a painter or sculptor and a place for the study of art"; it became "a place where motion pictures were made" and then "a place maintained and equipped for the transmission of radio and television programs." A curriculum organized around the metamorphic image is aware that electronics has transformed mission into transmission.

Gerald O'Grady